

BACKTOBACKTHEATRE

Information Pack

Introduction

Based in the regional Australian city of Geelong and formed in 1987, Back to Back Theatre operates around a core of five performers considered to have intellectual disabilities and is one of a few Australian theatre companies maintaining a full-time acting ensemble. It has produced over 21 new works and in the past has collaborated with companies such as Circus Oz, Melbourne Workers Theatre and My Friend the Chocolate Cake. Back to Back's work creates a view of the world not constrained by convention, logic or the imperative to be normal and has been confounding, disturbing and delighting audiences for almost 20 years.

Back to Back also engages with communities in regional Victoria and further afield through workshops, residencies and presentations.

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About Back to Back Theatre

Back to Back Theatre was founded in Geelong in 1987 to create theatre with people who are perceived to have a disability. It has gone on to become one of Australia's leading creative voices, focusing on moral, philosophical and political questions about the value of individual lives.

With a full-time ensemble of five actors, Back to Back creates work that is idiosyncratic, passionate and at times confronting. Back to Back's ensemble is made up of actors considered to have intellectual disabilities, a group of people who, in a culture obsessed with perfection and cosmetically enhanced 'beauty', are the real outsiders, and this position of marginality provides them with a unique and at times subversive view of the world. The stories they create explore "the cold dark side" of our times, be it the sexuality of people with disabilities, the uses of artificial intelligence and genetic screening, unfulfilled desire, the inevitability of death, and what the fixation with economic rationality and utilitarianism means for people excluded from the 'norm'.

With Bruce Gladwin as Artistic Director, Back to Back has nurtured a unique artistic voice, placing the ensemble at the centre of social and cultural dialogue. Through a process of research, improvisation, and scripting, and a collaboration between the ensemble, Artistic Director and invited guest artists, new work is realised.



Back to Back upends assumptions about who can be an artist. It also contributes to expanding debates about performance space, alternative non-verbal performance, and the relationships between actors and audiences. Critical and audience praise for its productions *MENTAL* (1999), *DOG FARM* (2000), *SOFT* (2002) and *SMALL METAL OBJECTS* (2005) has seen Back to Back's work extend beyond premiere status into national and international arenas.

The 2002 production *SOFT*, winner of The Age Critics' Award for Creative Excellence at the 2002 Melbourne Festival, toured to Switzerland and Germany in 2003, while *SMALL METAL OBJECTS* was awarded The Age Critics' Special Commendation at the 2005 Melbourne International Arts Festival. Since its premiere in 2005 and presentation at the 2006 Australian Performing Arts Market, *SMALL METAL OBJECTS* has received numerous national and international enquiries for presentation and is expected to tour nationally and internationally from 2007 onwards.

In April 2006 Back to Back was awarded the prestigious 2005 Sidney Myer Performing Arts [Group] Award by the Myer Foundation in recognition of its long-term contribution to Australian theatre.

The creative practice

Regional

Back to Back's position as a professional theatre company in Geelong is more than symbolic – it demonstrates that work of national significance can be generated outside the usual cultural epicentres, showing that stories which are meaningful locally also resonate nationally and internationally.

Artists with disabilities

Without making gross generalisations about people with disabilities, it is safe to say that within Australian society people with disabilities continue to be categorised as 'other'. With our ensemble of artists with intellectual disabilities, Back to Back is uniquely placed to comment on the social, cultural, ethical and value-based structures which define the institution known as 'the majority'.

Community engagement

Back to Back accepts responsibility for developing 'culture'. Our philosophical approach to creating work, and our methods for engaging with community, challenge the dominant mode of theatre in the regions, that is, touring networks and 'box office centric' programming. Back to Back's existence is a small but important beacon, which illuminates the fact that genuine engagement and community development has a significant effect on the diversity of Australian theatre.

Touring

In touring we find reward in the creative investment of the last 19 years, capitalising on ideas and theatrical forms which deserve to have a life beyond a premiere season. In taking advantage of our repertoire, we energise our creative personnel and find greater time for thinking about the development of new work.

Inclusiveness

It takes time to make a new work. Collectively we forge an inclusive ethos that allows ensemble and collaborators to travel together. The time frame and process is fluid enough to allow individuals to work with creative dignity, achieve understanding and find opportunities for meaningful contribution.

We seek to create work that is simple, rich, complex, accessible, original, challenging, surprising, strange, beguiling and intelligent. We hope to create an experience for the audience unlike anything experienced before, but which at the same time feels human and known. It's hard work, it doesn't come easily, and it scares the hell out of us each time we head off on that unknown path through the narrative woods!

Time

Boldly and unapologetically we imagine new forms of theatre. Periods of formal and informal creative development sustain our curiosity. With the greatest hurdle being our own fears, we propose a program to test those fears. Liberated by opportunities and resources afforded by a full time ensemble, our artistic process will, we hope, deliver us to a destination which quenches our creative curiosity and allows us to produce work which we ourselves would like to see.

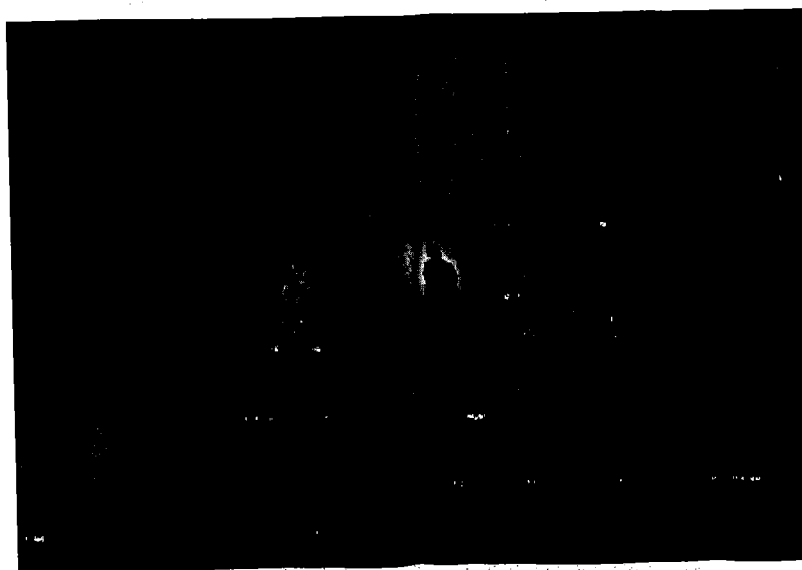
The ensemble

Since 1989 Back to Back has maintained a full-time ensemble of five performers. The company is defined by the specific personalities in the ensemble who help shape its uniquely creative voice. Two of the five ensemble members have worked full-time with Back to Back for over 15 years: their long-term commitment and endurance is without parallel in Australian theatre.

The ensemble structure provides Back to Back with a genuine opportunity to facilitate the personal growth of each performer, and to provide a safe, trusting environment for eliciting and exploring stories and ideas. The existence of an ensemble also provides the conditions for extended exploration of thematic concerns, and enables creative development periods of up to 24 months.

Back to Back nurtures the ensemble's artistic development as professional actors. Primary responsibility for this lies with the Artistic Director. Historically, this development has included designated professional development periods, most often through the employment of guest artists and specific skills-based training. In 2006, we increased and formalised our commitment to ensemble development by creating the position of Ensemble Development Co-ordinator to oversee the ensemble's fitness training, professional development, employment support and engagement with the broader arts industry.

"We are not afraid to step into the cold, dark side. At first we're scared, but afterwards we feel good. We are witty, emotional, we go deep into the work, we go places you can't go in real life."



Management and funding

Management Team

Back to Back is managed by joint CEOs: the General Manager and the Artistic Director. The team also includes an Administration Manager, Book Keeper and Ensemble Development Coordinator. The ensemble is involved at all levels of decision making and is represented on the Committee of Management. Our ongoing community program has its own annual team of guest director, guest artists, and support workers.

All members of staff, both creative and management, work closely together on strategic planning, with the Committee of Management overseeing financial management and artistic programming.

Funding

As an arts organisation, Back to Back is funded triennially through the Australia Council Theatre Board and Arts Victoria. As a supported employment service it is supported by the federal Department of Family & Community Services & Indigenous Affairs. Back to Back also applies for project funding from a range of sources including the philanthropic sector.

Although Back to Back is subsidised through grants, it is still necessary to generate income from box office takings and from contract fees for performances, tours and workshops.

Back to Back Theatre is an incorporated association with charitable status.

Staff

Artistic Director & Joint CEO

Bruce Gladwin

Ensemble

Mark Deans, Rita Halabarec, Nicki Holland, Simon Laherty, Sonia Teuben

General Manager & Joint CEO

Alice Nash

Administration Manager

Sue Hartigan

Ensemble Development Coordinator

Kate Sulan

Book Keeper

Marisa Chiappi

Committee of Management

Chair

Rose Hiscock

Treasurer

Ann Tonks

Secretary

Bobbie Hodge

Ensemble Representative

Simon Laherty

Ordinary Members

Patsie Frawley

Yoni Prior

Patrick Over

Ian Bracegirdle

Gillian Hoysted

Artistic Associates

Jeff Busby (photography), Hugh Covill (sound composition and design), Mark Cuthbertson (inflatable construction), Marcia Ferguson (guest director), Rhian Hinkley (film and animation), Shio Otani (costume), Jilli Romanis (support), Kate Sulan (guest director) Lin Tobias (design)

Press quotes

"Back to Back produces exemplary hybrid performance, placing the performer in multimedia amalgams of physical, aural and virtual space with an architectural sensibility, and bringing together a range of talents and intelligences that challenge the able / disabled binary. Back to Back tackles dark subjects, blending serious contemporary material about mind, body, morality and technology with a droll sense of humour in works that are non-patronising, either for performers and audiences, and sometimes downright lateral."

Realtime Oct / Nov 2005

"Standing up to the avalanche of expectation our society places on youth, beauty and intelligence, the company offers itself almost sacrificially to intense scrutiny. Indeed, its body of work has always been and continues to be a kind of public vivisection."

The Age Oct 2005

"It's a confronting place to be, and once again it's the wonderful Back to Back who are brave enough to take us there. "

The Program Oct 2005

"....an unforgettable theatrical experience."

The Age Oct 2005

"In an oddly low-key way it is highly exhilarating, as well as being fall-off-your-chair funny."

The Age Oct 2005

"We were clearly in the presence ... of absurdist semioticians."

The Age May 2003

"... you would have to create a new category of theatre to position Back to Back."

Zurich newspaper quoted in **The Age** Sept 2003

"Udder genius"

Time Out May 2003

"... the stories are told with such sly, gentle humour, we can laugh even while we acknowledge the ethical minefield they have knowingly entered."

The Bulletin Nov 2002

"These talented performers have a devastating ability to illuminate complex issues with their own form of lateral thinking."

The Age Oct 2002

"A unique and remarkable group of performers and designers."

The Age Oct 2002

"Geelong's Back to Back has been freaking people out for 15 years. Its actors disarm with humour and dazzle with a unique, cack-handed spin on the world."

The Herald Sun Oct 2002

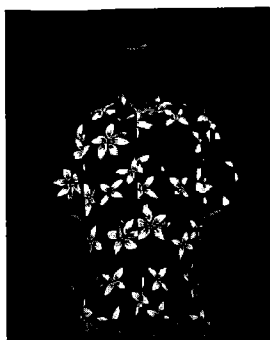
"There is something fantastically liberating and life affirming about the work of Geelong based Back to Back Theatre."

The Sunday Herald Sun 2000

"... Concentrated and inventive ... theatre."

The Sunday Age 2000

The ensemble

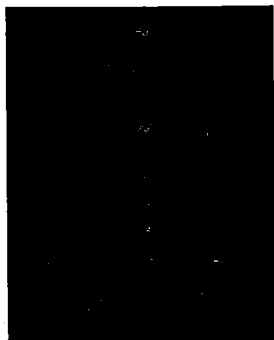
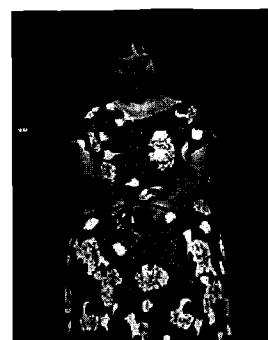


Mark Deans

Mark joined Back to Back in 1989 and has been described as a "modern day Chaplin" (The Adelaide Advertiser 2002). On television Mark has performed in BLUE HEELERS and NEIGHBOURS and made a series of Super8 films, including the prize winning MULLET and MARK DEANS HUMAN CANNONBALL. In 2002 he starred in the independent short film, VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

Rita Halabarec

Rita is the longest serving member of Back to Back and has been developing work with the company since its inception in 1987. In that time she has collaborated with a broad cross section of Australian artists performing on stage, in film and as the lead singer with Big Bag Band. Rita is a prolific visual artist whose work has been exhibited in Geelong. Rita's performance as the mermaid in MINDS EYE was nominated for a Green Room award in 1997.

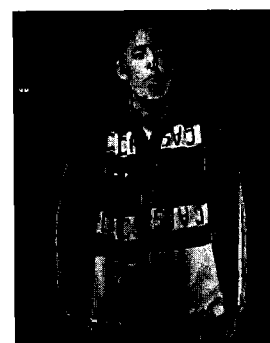


Nicki Holland

Nicki joined Back to Back in 1997 after working with Warrnambool's Break of Day Players. Her first role for Back to Back was Mrs Darling in PETER PAN, and since then she has gone on to create a series of emotional and romantically thwarted characters. Nicki played the doctor in SOFT both in Melbourne and in the 2003 European tour.

Simon Laherty

Simon first worked at Back to Back when he was a student at Nelson Park School, devising and performing in DRAG RACES IN LOVE (1999). From 2001 to 2003 Simon was an important contributor to the development and growth of Theatre of Speed, taking lead roles in ARNOLD, FISHMAN and the short film 12 WAYS TO OPEN A DOOR. Simon joined Back to Back in 2003. In 2004, Simon starred in the independent short film RODNEY. This year he played the character of Lucky Phil in the feature film NOISE.



Sonia Teuben

Sonia has been creating powerful, passionate, intensely emotional, and at times confronting, performances with Back to Back since she joined the company in 1993. Sonia stars in the film, PORN STAR, which has been screened at festivals in Germany, Montreal (2002) and London (2003). In 2002 Sonia travelled to Japan to participate in a workshop season with Muse Company.

Current work

SMALL METAL OBJECTS

The venue is the city, in any undercover public space with high volume pedestrian traffic. The audience is seated on a raised bank at one end of the space, individual sets of headphones providing an intimate and exclusive soundtrack of dialogue and music.

"When the show begins, you're not sure whom you should be watching. Steve and Gary are a quiet, slightly lonely pair existing on the fringe of society, and we are initially unable to see them amidst the eddying current of people crisscrossing the space. When our protagonists emerge, it is only gradually, two points slowly moving towards us through the crowd. We are the only witnesses to their small and intensely personal drama, passers-by oblivious to their conversation." From John Bailey, **Beat** 2005

SMALL METAL OBJECTS is the story of two invisible men and their inadvertent role in the downfall of a business awards night. A funny and disturbing examination of our cultural and individual identity, our visibility determined by our capacity to produce.

SMALL METAL OBJECTS explores the social implications of the 'financialisation' of our culture. Its theme has particular relevance for those who are traditionally perceived as less 'productive'- people with disabilities, the unemployed, outsiders, and the third world. The production is an examination of 'respect', or 'lack of respect', which consists of not being seen and not being accounted for as full human beings.

SMALL METAL OBJECTS delivers theatre to the mass public, lifting a seating bank from an auditorium and placing it within everyday experience. The audience becomes an installation for the general public; the general public becomes the extras of a dramatic narrative. It is a theatrical spectacle, generated by the powerful interplay of audience and public, oscillating between the roles of spectator and spectacle. The narrative is like a membrane, containing the tension, and allows a simple fable, of a financial transaction gone wrong, to unfold.

On a practical level, SMALL METAL OBJECTS requires no set or lighting. SMALL METAL OBJECTS offers potential producers a quality contemporary theatre experience, placed in the heart of a city's commercial landscape.



Works in repertoire

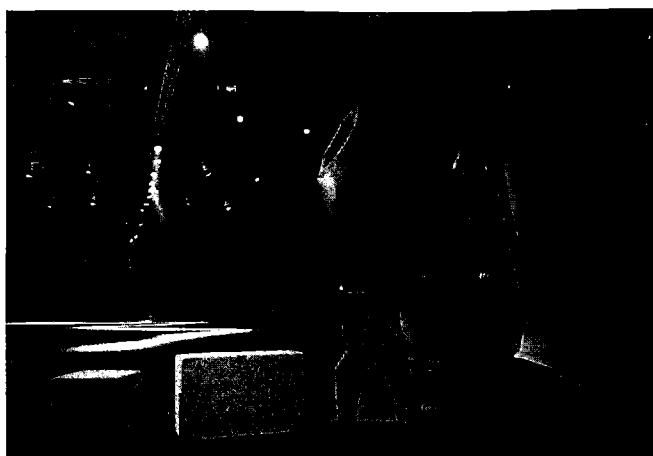
SOFT

SOFT explores the implications of the developing genetic technologies, specifically the ethical dilemmas of pre-natal screening.

Developed from conversations between the Back to Back ensemble and scientists working on the development and application of genetic screening technologies, SOFT's strength lies in the three performers and their physical representation of Down Syndrome, a genetic condition society increasingly seeks to screen and eradicate.

A sci-fi spectacular, housed in a giant inflatable bubble, SOFT merges architectural design, live performance, animation and 3D surround sound, delivered to the audience via individual headphones.

Beyond the performing arts, SOFT's design has been recognised in international sound and architectural design journals, for its human scale and technological innovation.



COW

COW is a one-man show performed by Back to Back ensemble member Mark Deans, depicting one man as the victim of theatrical technology and an omnipresent operator. It is a surreal slapstick anti-adventure. COW utilises sub-tone frequencies to manipulate physical objects within the performing space. The kinetic effect becomes the basis for a 'vaudeville' style routine.

COW is a highly accessible and universal work, suitable for audiences of diverse ages and cultural backgrounds. It is micro in scale yet cinematic in its presentation. Audiences respond to its simplicity, uniqueness and unpredictability.



Professional Work

SMALL METAL OBJECTS (2005)
SOFT (2002)
DOG FARM (2000)
MENTAL (1999)
BOOMTOWN (1998)
MR SEPTEMBER (1997)
PETER PAN *with Arena Theatre Company* (1997)
MINDS EYE *with Handspan Visual Theatre* (1996)
ROAD MOVIE *with melbourne workers theatre* (1996)
BACK TO BACK IN SHORTS (1995)
FREAK SHOW *with Circus Oz* (1994)
VOICES OF DESIRE (1993)
THE ADVENTURES OF BOBBI DAZZLER (1992)
WOODENHEAD (1992)
YELL BLUE MURDER (1991)
I DON'T WANT TO LIVE IN LARA ANYMORE (1991)
EVERYTHING AND THE MERMAID (1990)
THE PEG MACHINE (1990)
CINDERELLA, THE FAT COW DEPARTS (1989)
STINKING HOUSES (1989)
BIG BAG (1989)

